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Agencies hear of try to rub out Gorbachev

By Bill Gertz
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

U.S. intelligence agencies picked up reports of an assassination attempt against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by Kremlin rivals earlier this month, but were unable to corroborate them, according to intelligence sources.

Some intelligence officials at the State Department dismissed the reports as another example of "rumors" spread by Mr. Gorbachev's opponents to undermine his efforts to liberalize the Soviet system.

But the sources said "highly sensitive intelligence" collected in Mos-

cow from a communist diplomatic outpost reported an attempt on Mr. Gorbachev's life by Soviet Defense Minister Dmitri T. Yazov shortly before a March 6 Politburo meeting.

Mr. Yazov has not been seen in public since March 3, the sources said.

None of the officials familiar with the intelligence information would comment on whether it was obtained from electronic eavesdropping or from agents.

The alleged plot was outlined in CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency bulletins circulated within a small circle of U.S. government officials over the past two weeks.

"We tried to corroborate the [assassination] report but were unable to do so," said one intelligence official, who like the others interviewed declined to be named.

Coinciding with the assassination report, the sources said, intelligence agencies observed a dramatic increase in KGB communications on channels rarely used by the security service and the deployment of uniformed KGB troops in trucks near the Kremlin, where the Politburo meeting was held, the sources said.

Another intelligence official noted that reports of a Gorbachev assassination also surfaced last year when the Soviet leader was on vacation and two years ago when he was not seen in public for several months.

"I suspect somebody is trying to derail his [reform] program" by spreading the latest plot story, the official said.